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Admiral Turner Analyzes Situation

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ANNOUNCER: This week on American Interests, a conversation with former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Stansfield Turner on the Iranian arms scandal. What went wrong and what will be the repercussions for President Reagan's foreign policy?

ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER: Here we've lied to our friends and allies. Here we've had one policy on countering terrorism and then carried out a different one behind the scenes. We have lost credibility for the presidency and for the entire foreign policy of the United States.

My listening to what's being said overseas today is that people there are more concerned about this than they were about Watergate.

ANNOUNCER: President Reagan's Iranian initiative and the Nicaraguan Contra connection.

From Washington, this is American Interests.

MR. HEDRICK SMITH: Welcome to American Interests. I'm Hedrick Smith.

In recent weeks the Reagan Administration has been shaken by disclosures that members of the White House staff under orders from President Reagan have been selling arms covertly to Iran. In addition, some of the profits from those sales were funneled through secret Swiss bank accounts to the guerrilla Contras in Nicaragua.

With us to discuss those revelations and their repercussions is retired Admiral Stansfield Turner, former Director of Central Intelligence under President Carter.

Admiral Turner, do you think it was a good idea? Are there moderates in Iran and would this kind of thing work?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, this particular ploy would not work. We were taken in.

We found just what happened during the Carter Administration; there were people willing to negotiate with us, willing to make reasonable proposals to get our hostages out, but when it came to the bottom line they could not deliver. They couldn't produce the hostages.

Here too, we had people who were willing to talk with us, sounded reasonable, but they couldn't really deliver.

MR. SMITH: Did you actually get involved with moderates? I mean could they -- did they have enough influence and were you really convinced they were moderates?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes, I think they were moderates at that time, but you'll remember that's before Khomeini

really consolidated his control over that government in September of 1980.

And it was then, when he had consolidated it, made it into what really is a theocracy, that he was willing to negotiate the release of the hostages. The negotiations actually began in September, 1980 that were successfully culminated the day President Reagan was inaugurated in January, 1981.

MR. SMITH: But was there ever any idea that there would be a ransom; that you would give arms, you would supply arms or that would be part of the package?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I believe at one point there was some discussion of delivery of some of the arms that the Iranians had already purchased in the United States that were sitting in warehouses here waiting to be shipped. That never became a serious topic of discussion, but I do believe it was raised at one point. Whether President Carter would have agreed, we just don't know.

MR. SMITH: But in terms of your relations with President Carter, did he make it clear that he wasn't paying ransoms or was that kind of a thing that could have been considered?

ADMIRAL TURNER: He was very conscious of not wanting to pay ransoms. He was very conscious of protecting the national prestige. The principal demands, though, that we had were ones of humiliating nature, confessing that we had done things wrong with the Shah of Iran, for instance.

MR. SMITH: And returning the Shah to Iran, right?

ADMIRAL TURNER: And, of course, for a long time there was that demand also, though they did drop that after a while.

MR. SMITH: What about this business of third countries? I mean the Israelis were deeply involved in this, approached the Reagan Administration, offered to

act as go betweens. You must have had experiences like that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. In trying to get those hostages out we worked through lots of third countries.

We went and approached third countries who we thought had influence with Iran, particularly Moslem countries where they had a common language, in a sense. Many of them were helpful, tried to help, but none could succeed under the very end and then Algeria was absolutely vital to the release of the hostages and played a marvelous role for us.

MR. SMITH: But did they ever involve the quid pro quo of arms?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No.

MR. SMITH: Never did?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Not that I recall.

MR. SMITH: To deal with the issue of secrecy the Reagan Administration has essentially said Congress couldn't be trusted. From your experience can Congress be trusted with this kind of secret?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

We had no leaks from the Congress of covert actions of this type during the Carter Administration. We had quite a few covert actions going on. We briefed the Congress on all but three of them and we did not have leaks.

It's always a risk. Obviously, any time you tell one more person a secret, you're risking that it's going to be leak out. I don't think that Congress is less responsible than the White House or the Pentagon or the CIA or other organizations of our government.

MR. SMITH: But, in fact, you did not have damaging

leaks during that whole period of time, those four years, from Congress to this kind of covert operation?

ADMIRAL TURNER: On these kinds of covert operations, no. We, unfortunately, had leaks from the Congress, I believe, about collecting intelligence, things that hurt our ability to continue collecting information.

Though, again, I would emphasize those leaks were no worse than leaks coming out of the Executive Branch. The issue is the Congress leaks in certain areas and the Executive Branch leaks in other areas, each for a purpose.

MR. SMITH: But you said just a moment ago that there were three times that you didn't brief Congress. So, in effect, you're kind of agreeing with the Reagan Administration that there are times that you don't do it. What are those times and what were those three instances?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I do agree with the Reagan Administration that the law provides for the President being able to delay notification, not to avoid it, but to delay it in certain instances.

Our instances all concerned efforts to release the hostages, all concerned risk to human lives, American lives, if we had had any kind of a leak whatsoever.

The first instance is when we sent a CIA man into Teheran to lead the six Americans who were being held secretly in the Canadian Embassy out of Iran. And that was a very fine and successful operation engineered by the CIA. Those six people's lives, plus the man we sent in, all were at great risk if that had been any leak that those six even existed, because the Iranians did not know that.

Secondly, we, the CIA, thought up the idea of using the desert as a landing strip and flew a small airplane into that desert well in advance of the actual rescue operation.

MR. SMITH: This is long before desert one ever became public?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct.

MR. SMITH: All right.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Tested the soil, made sure the place was suitable for a landing operation, a refueling operation, and came back out again. Again, had there been any hint that this was going on, that people's lives in that plane were to be very much imperiled.

And finally, we had agents going in repeatedly to Teheran to prepare the ground for the rescue force when it got there. They had to have trucks and they had to have knowledge of where the roadblocks were. They had to have knowledge of who was on the walls and guarding the Embassy, and all of this. And the people who did that were going in right through the airport, very subject to scrutiny, and any hint that this was going on repeatedly would have jeopardized their lives.

So in those cases we said, "Let's not let anybody know who doesn't have to be part of the operation."

MR. SMITH: So is Reagan right then in not informing Congress? Are you saying that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: No, because the same circumstances were not there in this case. The same risks were not there. I don't believe this was one where there was a high risk to life, had it leaked accidentally.

MR. SMITH: Well, they say that the lives -- the hostages would have been at risk. They say that --

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that's proven false because when it leaked through Beirut, the hostages' lives were not in danger.

MR. SMITH: What's the dividing line? I mean, in effect you're saying there are certain operations where Congress shouldn't be informed at the time, but soon

after the event. But there were other times when they should be informed before the event. What's the dividing line? How do we tell as citizens, as journalists, as members of Congress how we can trust the Administration on something like this?

ADMIRAL TURNER: The first criteria is real urgency. Sometimes the President may have to move so rapidly that he finds it difficult to notify the Congress.

The second is where there is very imminent risk to human life, particularly to American lives.

There may be other instances also that we can't predict. So I don't think we ought to write a law that very clearly stipulates what those exceptions are. We've got to leave it to the judgment of presidents. They've got to have that loophole, in effect. They've got to have some way of avoiding notification, in my opinion.

MR. SMITH: In time urgent situations?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Largely in time urgent situations or in high risk to human life situations.

MR. SMITH: In effect, the same thing as not disclosing when troops are going into battle in advance of that?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Very similar.

MR. SMITH: If you're talking about a longer term political operation that's going to last six months, 12 months, 18 months, then I think you're saying to me it's a different question?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think in most of those instances it's not justified and it's a situation in which the Congress is much more likely to be able to make a meaningful contribution.

MR. SMITH: Like what? What could they do?

ADMIRAL TURNER: They can advise the President that, "It really doesn't make sense to trade arms for hostages, Mr. President. It's going to get us into a lot of trouble and your advisors are pretty narrow in their focus and we now are looking at it from a broader perspective." That's what the Congressional oversight is all about.

MR. SMITH: In other words, you're saying that to a certain degree Congress is there to give the President bad news in advance rather than bad news after the landing?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's correct.

MR. SMITH: Or the crash landing?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes.

MR. SMITH: What about the argument of Bud McFarlane, the former National Security Advisor, who wrote in The Washington Post not too long ago that this operation was very much like the opening to China which was orchestrated by Henry Kissinger back for President Nixon in 1972, that all that had to be conducted in secrecy in order not to embarrass the Chinese leaders in order to make that opening so that when it was disclosed, everything was set, everything was in place and it would all work? I mean do you see that as a parallel here?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes, I think that is a parallel and presidents will always use their national security advisors in this way, and they don't come under this law that requires congressional notification.

A President's entitled to have his own advisors. He's entitled to have his own people talk to other people in other countries.

The dividing line comes when it is a very operational matter. Giving arms in addition to just talking with people is a lot different than pure diplomacy.



MR. SMITH: So when you go from diplomacy to covert operations, the ball game changes. When you don't have lives quite at stake, the ball game changes. And that's where Turner's lines are, is that right?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes, and they're pretty fuzzy lines, I would acknowledge. But I hope the Congress does not now try to draw some very specific lines.

This is a fuzzy area. We do want presidents to be able, from time-to-time, to take bold initiatives. It's difficult to take a bold initiative and get it cleared through the bureaucracy. The bureaucracy doesn't like to change. They don't like something new.

So I admire President Nixon's opening to China through this back door. He took a chance, he won. Mr. Reagan took another chance, he lost. The fact that he lost and is suffering badly politically now is going to caution him, and future presidents, about taking chances through avoiding the bureaucracy by using the National Security Council.

I think it's a self correcting situation and we don't need a new law, a new wiring diagram, new regulations, or whatever to control it because the lines are fuzzy.

MR. SMITH: Isn't there a big difference, though, between Nixon and Reagan? Nixon succeeded in China because Kissinger was dealing with Mao tse Tung and Chou en Lai, the number one and number two people in China. We don't yet know for sure who McFarlane and others were dealing with, Colonel Ollie North, in Iran, but they sure as heck weren't Khomeini the number one, two and three guys. So that it was a riskier operation to begin with. It's a question of judgment on when you go, isn't it?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Absolutely. It was just a bad judgment call. If we've learned one thing since 1978, it's that Khomeini never compromises. And we ought to also understand that Khomeini is in charge of that government there.

There may be people in the government who recognize they ought to do something to repair their image in the world and to make better overtures to the West so they can buy things that they need, but there's nobody, in my opinion, in that government today who wants to curry up to the Great Satan, the United States of America.

We can make pragmatic deals with them, perhaps, but we made a bad deal here. We gave a lot of arms and what happened? We got three hostages back and we had one hostage killed and three more hostages taken. We've got a net loss on this deal so far.

MR. SMITH: Then you're suggesting that, to go back to my original question, there may be moderates but could it work, was it naive?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think it was very naive. I think it showed a lack of understanding of the culture in Iran and the culture in the Middle East.

MR. SMITH: What about our own system, understanding our own system? It came out, it came out of Beirut, it was planted perhaps by Syrians or Iranians who wanted to disrupt the contact and so forth.

But there is a question of whether or not a democracy can run covert operations like this, whether or not the whistle had been blown in Beirut it would have come out at some time or another. Can we get away with these things?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I'm amazed that it didn't come out within our own system earlier, as a matter of fact. I happen to believe that since 1974 when the Congress passed the law that said "it must be informed of covert operations," now these are operations to influence what's happening in other countries, not collecting secret intelligence, since that law I don't believe you can get away with what I would term a controversial covert action. If it is a covert action that would stir great controversy in the body politic if it were public, then within the clearance system somebody's

going to leak it, if you see what I mean, as opposed to a covert action that we would all agree on?

MR. SMITH: In other words, if it's going to cause sharp disagreements within the government and within the Congress and within the body politic, somebody inside the government who doesn't approve of the policy is going to get the word out?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Absolutely. It's a price we paid for that law.

I happen to think the price is worth it because you need congressional oversight of these secret activities. You cannot have unaccountable secret foreign policy in our country. Somebody's got to look over the President's shoulder. There is a question of timing and all this, but in the long run the Congress must be able to look into these secret activities.

So the law is necessary. It's a price we pay and I think it's probably not a good idea to do covert foreign policy if the body politic would not support it.

MR. SMITH: Isn't there another problem here? Can you expect to keep secret and keep out of trouble if you're saying one thing in public and another thing in private? I mean normally speaking I would imagine, but tell me from your experience inside of government, that covert operations are intended to extend the line of policy that you're proclaiming in public, but doing things you just don't want to do publicly? But in this case the line of policy was really contrary to what was being said in public. I mean isn't that really where the problem is?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think that's a good big -- a good bit of the problem, yes. And it's probably very difficult to pull off a covert actions under those circumstances.

Generally speaking, you've got to have an established

policy and the covert activity is to push that, to further it in ways it can't be done openly.

For instance, you may want to persuade the Foreign Minister of some country to take a certain position. But he's anti-American basically and if you approach him clearly from an American point of view, he's going to be resistant. If you can get somebody else to approach him not from an American point of view, even if we pay that person, let's say, maybe he will listen to reason and come along with the American point of view. So that's the kind of thing you do in secret to further your public pressure on that Foreign Minister.

But what is most distressing to me about this current situation is that there's so much high officials saying, "I didn't know anything." Well --

MR. SMITH: You know, I find that really hard to believe. Going back over the years, and you spent four years at the CIA, you spent a whole career in the Navy. You know about these procedures. I've been reporting in and out of Washington for 25 years. There are committees, there was the 40 committee, there was the 5412 committee; Presidents have sat on committees, they've had their National Security Advisors, Secretaries of State, Directors of its Central Intelligence, all these people meeting regularly controlling the operations, approving them. Do you presume all that procedure was set aside?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh, I think a lot of it was set aside, but I don't think that is any excuse. We should be asking not what did Mr. Shultz know, what did Mr. Weinberger know; we should be asking what should they have known. If they were managing their departments well, were they getting the information that was in their departments? Somebody was helping North in those departments. And were they diligent in asking the right questions?

MR. SMITH: Should the President have known?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Oh yes, the President should have known because this is a major shift in foreign policy and he certainly should have been informed. It's a gross error on both North and Poindexter's part not to have pushed it forward. That just doesn't rest well with me.

But take a man like Mr. Shultz, he said at first that he didn't know much about this. He wasn't kept informed. But now we're told that on the 7th of January this year he was in an extensive briefing, meeting about this, with the President.

The President didn't make any decision at that meeting, but on the 17th of January he did. He signed a directive to proceed with this arms deal with Iran.

Well, what did Mr. Shultz do between the 7th of January and the 4th of November when it all came out in the public? Didn't he ever ask, "What did the President decide after I opposed this and Weinberger opposed this?" He certainly should have kept himself informed.

MR. SMITH: What about the CIA? I mean you've mentioned a couple of times in passing that North had to have help. It has been disclosed that there were Central Intelligence Agency people involved, certainly, on the missions going to Iran with Bud McFarlane and Colonel North and so forth. For a long time the CIA was called the rogue elephant, the uncontrolled agency and it spent years before you and your time kind of recouping, trying to repair its image and get itself back under control. Where is it in all this both in terms of what happened and in terms of its image today?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, I'm afraid its image is going to be hurt. I've been afraid of that ever since the Contra operation started because it was clear somebody was going to be left holding the bag when that thing fell apart, which it will one of these days. And who will hold the bag, the CIA.

In this instance I'm very worried. It appears that the CIA started supporting this operation, the actual flow of arms, in November, 1985. That's before the January 17, 1986 directive of the President. It's illegal for them to provide any kind of covert support to anything of this nature without having a presidential directive in writing.

But I do want to say, Rick, that we all have to be cautious here now because we're dealing with very limited facts.

And the CIA people that I knew were very conscientious about understanding these laws and rules and I therefore, want to be hesitant to leave the impression that I think they broke the law or broke the rules at that time. It's too early to tell that. But there is circumstantial evidence that points in that direction today. So I'm worried about the future of the CIA. I hope the record will show otherwise.

MR. SMITH: Talking about what people up top know and what people further on down the line know within the government, Don Regan at one point said the President was like the president of the bank and he couldn't know what a bank teller was doing if a bank teller was swapping money out of the till.

ADMIRAL TURNER: I don't want to be in his bank. I don't want to be a stockholder in a bank. I expect the president of any bank I belong to to have a system so that tellers can't do that. Now, he may not be down there looking at the teller personally. But he's responsible for that and if a teller steals my money, I'm going to the president of the bank and blame him. That's a terrible excuse on Mr. Regan's part. I think it's one that justifies his dismissal immediately.

MR. SMITH: What about Bill Casey the head of the CIA, should he be removed, too, in order to reestablish trust with Congress and foreign countries?

ADMIRAL TURNER: It's premature for us to pass judgment on that because we haven't enough facts as to what his

and the CIA's involvement in this Contra aid situation is.

MR. SMITH: Admiral Turner, a lot of people have compared this situation to Watergate and the Watergate scandal which led to President Nixon's resignation. There are other people who say, you know, this really isn't a Watergate. That what was involved in Watergate was a coverup of an operation which was directed for the President's personal gain, namely is reelection and in this case Reagan wasn't involved in that. How do you size it up?

ADMIRAL TURNER: This is not a Watergate, but it is a more serious problem for the United States of America than Watergate.

MR. SMITH: Why?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, that was petty crimes and lying, covering up --

MR. SMITH: Well, that led to the resignation of a President.

ADMIRAL TURNER: Sure, but it led -- but it was a domestic political consideration. It hurt our domestic political process. There were some spill overs into our international reputation, but much less than in this one.

Here we've lied to our friends and allies. Here we've had one policy on countering terrorism and then carried out a different one behind the scenes. We have lost credibility for the presidency and for the entire foreign policy of the United States.

My listening to what's being said overseas today is that people there are more concerned about this than they were about Watergate.

MR. SMITH: Why? Because they regarded Watergate as a domestic problem of ours?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. They couldn't understand Watergate. In their countries and parliamentary systems the Prime Minister would have simply resigned. They would have formed a new government and they'd be on about their business.

MR. SMITH: How do we recoup in terms of foreign policy?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Well, the personnel changes are important to show that the President recognizes his people let him down, that there was a bad management, bad teamwork effort here. So I think a lot more housecleaning is important.

MR. SMITH: I mean is the terrorism policy effectively in shambles for the rest of the Administration?

ADMIRAL TURNER: Yes. Yes, it is.

MR. SMITH: I mean it's pretty hard to see even in the next two years how any government will know what it's hearing from Secretary of Shultz or from the White House or from any American ambassador what's really going on behind the scenes, isn't that true?

ADMIRAL TURNER: That's absolutely true and it's the reason, one of the reasons, that this is more serious than Watergate because where do we hurt worst? Is it the Middle East, is it Europe, is it in Iran itself?

I think we're hurt worst in our overall ability to counter terrorism because that takes international cooperation. We've got to have lots of countries work together against terrorism. Only the United States can lead that coalition against terrorism. We've lost respect today. We've lost respect for our leadership in the anti-terrorism crusade. No one else can step up and fill that shoe. We've got to do it, we've got to restore our credibility. It's going to take time.

MR. SMITH: Is Shultz in a position, having distanced himself from this operation, having said he disapproved



of it, argued against it, didn't know about it, does he have some creditability abroad that will help now?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think he does. I think that with the foreigners he has some of that credibility. I question his credibility inside the United States as Secretary of State who didn't inform himself about what was going on when he certainly knew this policy of selling arms to Iran was very much around.

MR. SMITH: Well, strange as it might sound, let's just imagine for a moment that President Reagan had picked, not Frank Carlucci to be his new National Security Advisor, but Stansfield Turner, what advice would you give him beyond what you just said, admit the mistake? What would you say to him we should now do?

ADMIRAL TURNER: I think he should continue to clean house inside the National Security Council staff, then a certain number of other Cabinet officers and that would be tough to decide right now until we had all the facts as to who should go. Make as clean a breast of it as he could and try to get on with an arms control program.

MR. SMITH: Well, you mentioned the Soviets. Where do we stand with the Soviets on this? There has already been an indication after the Reykjavik summit that Gorbachav was going to sit it out and watch Reagan for a while, whether or not the whole two years or just six months, to see how he did with Congress. Now is there going to be a greater tendency of the Soviets to sit back or are they going to try to charge in and take advantage of us somewhere around the world?

ADMIRAL TURNER: My guess is that they'll try to take advantage of us at the arms control negotiations and they'll feel that Mr. Reagan, as I think he does, needs a victory someplace, needs a success rather someplace. And one place would be to come off with a good arms control agreement.

MR. SMITH: Thank you very much, Admiral Turner.